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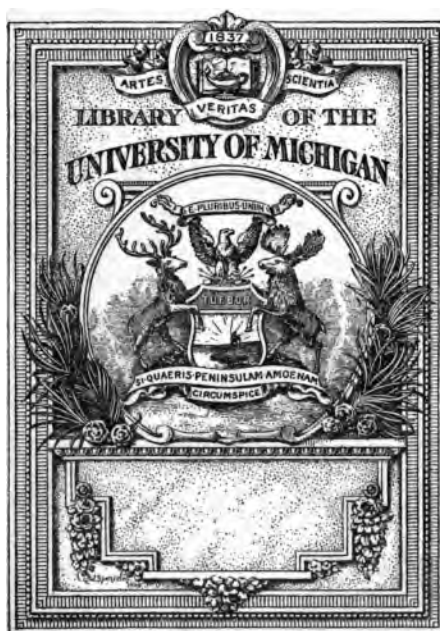
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The ...
at Ober-Schmiedberg
1830

ARCHDEACON FARRAR



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The Passion Play

at

Oberammergau

The Passion Play

at

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Oberammergau

1890

BY

F. W. FARRAR, D.D., F.R.S.

ARCHDEACON AND CANON OF WESTMINSTER, ETC. ETC.



LONDON

WILLIAM HEINEMANN

1890

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Preface

WHEN I visited Oberammergau to see the final rehearsal of the Passion Play on May 18, 1890, I had no intention of publishing in this form any record of my impressions. But on my return home I found that the interest in the subject was so widespread, that I accepted a request to write some account of what I had seen. I am so constantly questioned on the subject that I have here printed

what I had to say in a more permanent form.

In 1880 two friends of mine were so deeply moved by the doubt whether it was *right* to witness a play which represented the Lord Jesus Christ, that even when they arrived at Ettal, within three miles of Oberammergau, they were on the point of turning back, and yielding to the sense of misgiving which had haunted them throughout their journey to the place. There are not a few English men and women, of earnest and reverent minds, who denounce the play as blasphemous, and consider it a sin to witness it. I have

endeavoured to indicate the reasons why such an opinion must be regarded as harsh and insular. Of course, if ordinary sight-seers go to the play as a mere idle show, carrying with them only the vulgarest manners and the vulgarest motives, they turn the whole scene into a profanation ; but they carry the profanation with themselves. The actors, the population of Oberammergau, and the simple peasant spectators, for whom, and for whom alone, the play was originally intended, look upon themselves as taking part in an act of devotion, and their sobs and tears show the depths of their sincerity. Many of

them kneel down and pray on entering the theatre as they do when they go to worship in a church. The religious teachers, who have for more than two and a half centuries given their warmest sanction to the Play, have simply been actuated by the principle expressed by Horace :

*Segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem,
Quam quæ sint oculis subjecta fidelibus, et quæ
Ipse sibi tradit spectator.*

That principle is as old as Herodotus, who says that "Men's ears are less trustworthy than their eyes,"¹ and it

¹ Herod. i. 8.

was enshrined in the Greek proverb, "Sight is more faithful than hearing." Luther had opportunities for observing the effect of Miracle Plays, and he said that "such spectacles often do more good and produce more impression than sermons."

The remarks of Pastor Daisenberger, in a sermon preached on Whit Sunday, 1870, in the church at Oberammergau, are so complete a vindication of the play from all suggestions of sordid motives, and so strong a statement of its sacred character, that I cannot do better than reproduce them. He said, with touching dignity and

sincerity :¹ — “ Dear Friends, You are called upon this year to fulfil a great and holy vow ; you will, as it were in some measure, take part in the Apostolic office. From the day of Pentecost the Apostles went into all lands to preach Jesus the Crucified—His doctrines and His deeds, His life and His death, His resurrection and His glorification — to show to men how ancient prophecies, how the types of the Old Testament, were fulfilled in Him. We are not now to go forth into the world to make known the

¹ The sermon is reported in a lecture on the Play by Mr. A. Tower Robinson, of Berwick-on-Tweed.

Crucified, but thousands during this year will come to us, and ours will be the privilege to represent before them what the Apostles preached. If we work together with holy zeal worthily to represent these mysteries, then we may hope that, with God's grace, great blessings may ensue. Many pious Christians, touched by the representation of their Saviour's death, will return home edified and strengthened in their faith and love, and with renewed resolutions to continue His faithful disciples. Many of the lukewarm and frivolous, unable to throw off the solemn impressions they have received, will in future show that the

seeds of a more Christian life were sown here. And it may be that the sight of the Redeemer's great love for mankind, and of His bitter sufferings for their sins, may draw tears of repentance from the eyes of sinners, and these tears, aided by God's good spirit, may be the beginning of a sincere conversion, and this gazing on the Passion may be the way by which the Good Shepherd seeks and finds His lost sheep. But, dear friends, we can only hope for God's blessing if we undertake our work with pure motives and holy zeal, and not with selfish and vainglorious motives. If with the latter, God will look down upon

us and upon our work with displeasure, we shall be misusing and dishonouring the most sacred things, we shall reap to ourselves, instead of honour, blame, instead of gain, most bitter loss.

“It is not our aim to shine in the art of acting, that would be presumptuous and ridiculous in simple country people ; but it must be the earnest desire of each one to try and represent worthily this most holy mystery. Each one who takes the least part in this work is a necessary link in the great chain ; let him therefore endeavour to fulfil his task to the best of his ability, and thus contribute to the success of the whole.”

Then, after addressing each class of performers upon their own peculiar work, the preacher adds:—"But as the Apostles taught men not only by word, but also by their holy conversation, so must we endeavour, if our work is to be blessed to the hearts of men, to show, by our Christ-like, moral conduct, not merely before the public, but in our private life, the salutary effect produced on our souls by the consideration of the atoning death of our Lord. Let nothing go on either within or without the theatre, in the streets, in your houses, or in the church, which can give occasion of offence.

The eyes of many strangers will be fixed, not only on our Play, but on ourselves. Let us so live that we may have nothing to fear from the all-searching eye of God, and the scrutinising gaze of our fellow-men. Let us from this time show by increased zeal for our holy religion, by our deep reverence for holy things, by our greater love for our Redeemer, by our pure morals, by our avoidance of sin, and our renewal of virtues, that the representation of the Passion is not only of spiritual benefit to others, but to ourselves as well. Let us pray fervently that that Spirit may assist us in the task we have undertaken.

May He ever be with us and in us.
Amen."

A second motive which I have had in view in writing this paper has been the vindication of the people of Oberammergau from the foolish and uncharitable attacks to which they have been subjected. I have, for instance, seen in one paper the following passage:—"A great many who look upon their own Protestant country with a sort of horror have visited the Passion Play in Bavaria, and have returned wiser and sadder men. They had created an ideal peasantry, ideal performers, and ideal Catholics, and when

they arrived at the scene they found matters generally worse than they are at Whitechapel or in the New Cut. There is no religion about the Passion Play at all, and it is as much a monetary speculation as is the Pavilion or the Aquarium ; while the consumption of beer—especially between the acts—is appalling.” Such a judgment is shockingly false and biassed. The comparison of the sweet, pure, happy, and deeply religious population of this Bavarian village, in which I did not hear one evil word, or see one unseemly sight, or find the slightest trace of intemperance, with the drunken squalor

and blasphemy and vice of our London slums, is an injustice so gross as to call for the strongest reprobation. Nor less calumnious is the frequently repeated charge of greed. On the contrary, the people have shown the most beautiful and disinterested magnanimity. Not to speak of other proposals, in 1872 they refused no less than 60,000 florins, offered them if they would perform the Play in Vienna. The actors and the people have repeatedly risen superior to the temptations which the world, the flesh, and the devil seem determined to throw in their way. Three years ago 3000 florins was offered them

by an Englishman merely for the music of the Play, and they at once declined the offer. In 1871 Mayr, who has been made the chief butt for recent attacks, only received £13 for many months of strain, fatigue, and interruption of his own means of earning a livelihood involved in studying and acting his very trying part. If the experience of 1890 should indeed prove that the village is unable to resist the evil influences which are rushing upon it from the curiosity of a sight-seeing world, I believe that Mayr and all the best men of the village will say, with the Maccabees, *Moriamur in*

simplicitate nostra, and will vote that this year shall witness the last public presentation of the Passion Play.

Indeed, it may well be questioned whether the suppression of the Play has not at last become desirable. When it degenerates into a European spectacle, criticised in all the newspapers by hundreds of reporters as though it were an opera in Dresden or Vienna, it becomes, alas! a fatal anachronism. It is endangered by an alien atmosphere. The Play derives its origin from days in which the whole attitude of the minds of men in relation to religious questions was very different from what now

it is. To take but one illustration of the change. In the Middle Ages, if we had entered a Gallery of Art, we should have found that Art was almost exclusively the handmaid of Religion ; that almost every picture was suggested by sacred subjects ; and that all the most lovely and important of them were representations of the Infancy, the Miracles, or the Sufferings of our Lord. Enter the Art Galleries of London or Paris this year, and among hundreds of landscapes, and portraits, and nursery trivialities, and *genre* subjects generally, you will not find five religious pictures of real value. The fact may be due

partly to a diminution of faith, and an increase of worldliness; but it may be also due in part to deeper and better feelings. The artist may find himself oppressed by the awfulness of the subjects which were so familiar to the mediæval painters, and he may even feel an unconscious revival of that adoring reverence which made the painters of the Catacombs avoid any but symbolic presentations of the Lord of their salvation. I must confess that the tremendous realism of the Crucifixion in the Play — especially the piercing of the side by a spear, which, by a mechanical contrivance of the spear-head,

leaves the semblance of a deep gash—seemed to me overwhelmingly oppressive. Up to the Crucifixion scene I could watch and listen with profit; but from the moment that the Cross was raised my imagination was perturbed and overwhelmed with the doubt whether this scene was not far too majestically sacred for such presentation. The Oberammergau Play is a beautiful and touching survival from the religious habits and methods of simple and untaught ages. Since it was, so to speak, discovered in 1850 by Dean Lake and Professor Henry Smith, and made an object of interest to English and

Americans by Dean Stanley, it has been violently transplanted into uncongenial conditions, and many would feel relieved if the view prevailed that the vow of the villagers has now been adequately fulfilled, and that the Play may be henceforth reckoned among the observances of "the days that are no more."¹

¹ Since these pages have been in print I have read a striking article on "The Ammergau Mystery or Sacred Drama of 1860, by A Spectator," in *Macmillan's Magazine* for October 1860. The "Spectator" was Dean Stanley; and I find that in many respects his impressions resembled my own. The reader will be glad to see one or two of his remarks.

He combats the belief that the suppression of the Mystery Plays was due to Protestantism. They survived the Middle Ages and the Reformation, and were long

common in the South of Germany. Luther sanctioned them ; so did Archbishop Petersen, founder of the Lutheran Church in Sweden. The Lutheran Bishops of the Danish Church composed them down to the end of the seventeenth century. In Holland a drama of this kind is assigned to no less a person than Grotius. Even in England they were performed in the days of James I., and Milton's "Paradise Lost" was originally intended to be a sacred drama. On the other hand, they were prohibited in 1779 by the Roman Catholic Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg. In 1810 the Ammergau Play was condemned in Munich as "being in its very idea a gross indecorum ;" but was specially permitted by the King, Max Joseph, after an appeal from the Oberammergau peasantry. Max Joseph was "a latitudinarian king, whose statue at Munich is characteristically distinguished by a bas-relief of the genius of Humanity endeavouring to reconcile a Roman Catholic prelate and a Lutheran preacher." The Play was, however, purged from all objectionable elements—mainly by Weiss, who rewrote the dialogue and recast the plot ; Dedler, the schoolmaster and organist ; and Alliani, the Dom-Provost, known as the Roman Catholic translator of the Bible into German. (To these should be added Pastor Daisenberger.) Its

interest depends on its being "the only serious existing attempt to reproduce in a dramatic form the most sacred of all events."

After speaking of the audience, which in 1860 was mainly composed of peasants ; of the homely accommodation ; of the completely local and unprofessional character of the transaction ; of the deep attention of the spectators, which at the more solemn or affecting parts passes into a silence that can be felt ; and of the contagion of reverence which, at least on the spot, disarms the objector, the Dean proceeds to give his chief impressions. Among them were :

1. The intended, or unconscious, resemblance of the Play and its surroundings to the Athenian tragedies in the Dionysiac theatre.
2. The peculiarity of the Chorus, and the powerful, unflagging interest of the representation.
3. The deep effect produced by the dignity and distinctness of the principal figure, though the effect is sustained by the absence of all art, and the independence of all the agitations of human passion.
4. The traditional elements in the representation of Judas, and the remark made, after the scenes in which he

appears, by a thoughtful German Catholic, that "we have no right to say that Judas was lost."

5. The anti-priestly impressions created by the conspiracies of the Sanhedrim, which "present (unintentionally it may be, but, if so, the more impressively) the appearance of a hideous caricature of a great ecclesiastical assembly."

6. The comparative failure of the female parts, except when the Virgin bids farewell to Christ.

7. The long, immovable, almost unbroken silence of the central figure in all the final scenes.

8. The reproduction by the scenes of well-known paintings.

9. The entirely Scriptural, and therefore unconsciously Protestant, character of the whole representation. There is not one apocryphal incident, except that of Veronica and the handkerchief; no special prominence is given to the Virgin Mary.

The Dean evidently dreaded the effect which would be produced by increased publicity. He ends with the words: "The best wish that can be offered for the continuance of the Play is that it may remain alone of its kind, and that it may never attract any large additional

influx of spectators from distant regions or uncongenial circles."

To these remarks of Dean Stanley I will only add that religious dramas often have been, and in some places still are, enacted in churches. They are also common in all other forms of religion. I have had the advantage of reading the remarkable Mohammedan "Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain," which is acted night after night during the month Muharram in India. It has been kindly lent to me by General Sir Lewis Pelly, M.P., and presents a highly remarkable analogy to the Passion Play at Oberammergau.

The Passion Play

at

Oberammergau

DURING the next four months English and Americans to the number of many thousands will be flocking to the lovely valley of Oberammergau to see the famous Passion Play for which the village has acquired a world-wide reputation. It is not my object to add another hand-book to those which have been already written.

The "Textbuch," which contains not only the songs of the chorus but also the entire dialogue, may now be purchased at Innsbruck, at Munich, and in every street of the village. It is accompanied with a full account of the various acts, scenes, and interludes, which it is therefore unnecessary for me to describe. I only desire to record the impressions made upon my own mind by a visit to this sweet and smiling valley this year, for the purpose of being present at the *Hauptprobe*—or what might be called in England "the dress rehearsal"—of the sacred play.

Coming from Verona to Bozen, and

from Bozen over the Brenner Pass to Innsbruck, and thence to Partenkirchen, it was impossible not to be struck by the contrast between the Italians and the Germans. We arrived at Bozen on Ascension Day, May 15, and saw the people at their best. They are not a beautiful people like the Italians. We do not see among them at every turn those perfect, oval, olive-tinted faces, with deep-glowing eyes, which have been immortalised in so many pictures of Raphael and Bernardino Luini; but we find ourselves in the midst of a quiet, devout, manly-looking race, actuated, as is evident, by deep religious feeling.

Mendicancy ceases as we cross the frontier. In every town and in almost every street of Italy the traveller is assailed by demands for *qualche cosa*, and is assured in pathetic tones, "*Ao fame, signore.*" But after crossing the frontier I did not meet a single beggar, although one poor blind old man sits at the top of the pass at Ettal, and without asking for anything plays a few sad strains on an accordion. The devotion and self-respect of the people is an element which must be taken into account in judging of the Oberammergau play.

Nor must it be forgotten that they are Roman Catholics, familiarised from in-

fancy with the presentation of the Crucifixion before their eyes as though it were the sole absorbing fact in the work of Christ. Before starting from Bozen, I walked over the bridge which spans the rapid Eisak, and up the Calvarienberg to the platform of a church which commands a fine view of the dolomite and porphyry ranges. On every side was a wealth of wild flowers ; the air was aromatic under the burning sunshine of the spring morning. A nightingale on a "bloomy spray" which grew in a crevice of the rock over my head was fearlessly pouring forth a tumult of song which was

answered from another bush by its mate. But at every turning of the path amid those glad and bright surroundings was one of the "Stations of the Cross." In large, ghastly, and horribly realistic figures, our Lord was represented in the midst of His judges or executioners. Their faces are hideous with every expression of ferocity and hatred, and He is everywhere shown in the lowest depth of humiliation, with failing limbs, blue lips, and face flecked with blood. It might well be questioned whether this one-sided aspect of the work of man's redemption is not in its essence irreverent and erroneous, and

whether it does not involve a threefold error—the error of viewing the life of Jesus, not only predominantly, but almost *exclusively*, on the one day of His subjection to the hour and power of darkness, rather than in its divine totality from the Incarnation to the Session at God's right hand;—the error of turning men's thoughts habitually to a Christ dying or dead, rather than to Him who is alive for evermore;—and the error of identifying life unwisely with scenes of gloom and anguish. The Greek view of life was confessedly too gay and sensuous and godless. But at least it realised the truths

which Heaven meant to be taught by the “pomp and prodigality” of earth and sky, and those truths are needed to redress the balance of horror which was wrongly poised in many a mediæval and monastic ideal. I touch on this point, because due weight must be allowed to it if we are to judge fairly of the Oberammergau Passion Play. The step from such “Stations of the Cross”—the step, for instance, from the plastic realism of the life-size figures on the Monte Sacro at Varallo, to a *scenic* representation of the same events—is very small. The early Christians, as we know, would probably have shrunk from a Passion Play as

a profanation, and their feeling is shared by multitudes now. But we must remember the vast influence of custom in matters of opinion. A Latin Cross is now the commonest symbol of Christianity, yet in the older Catacombs there is no Latin Cross, and perhaps the earliest Latin Cross is found on the tomb of the Empress Galla Placidia, A.D. 451. For many centuries there was no representation of a Dead Christ, and for more than three centuries great Fathers like Eusebius and Epiphanius considered it profane even to paint Christ at all.¹ For eight or nine or more

¹ The words of the Christian interlocutor in Minucius

centuries the Crucifixion is only distantly symbolised, not realistically painted; and it was not till far on in the Middle Ages that portable crucifixes were commonly known or used. In the old sixth-century Church of San Apollinare Nuovo in

Felix, "*Cruces nec colimus, nec optamus*," are well known. St. Irenæus evidently disapproved of the representations even of the living Christ, which first gained vogue, not among orthodox Christians, but among the Gnostics (*c. Hær. i. 25*). Eusebius in the fourth century had seen no trustworthy picture of Christ ("*H. E.*" viii. 19), and evidently disapproved of any attempt to delineate Him (Letter to the Empress Constantia : see Labbe, "*Conc.*" vi. 493; Migne, "*Patrol. Græc.*" xx. 1515; Westcott, "*Ep. of St. John*," p. 330; Farrar, "*Lives of the Fathers*," i. 21). The anecdote of Epiphanius tearing down a curtain on which was woven a representation of Christ or of some sacred person is found in "*Ep. ad Joann. Hiersol.*" § ix.

Ravenna there is a long series of mosaics representing the life of Christ, but a Crucifixion has no place among them. The artist passes on at once from the Betrayal to the Resurrection and the Ascension. On these subjects the influence of monasticism has effected an enormous change in the opinions and feelings of Western Christianity, and this must be recognised by all who would arrive at an impartial estimate of the Play at Oberammergau. It cannot be understood apart from the age-long beliefs and even superstitions of the people.

This truth was further brought home to my mind by another incident. From

Innsbruck it is necessary to take a carriage and pair to drive to Partenkirchen. The drive of nine hours is from first to last through country of enchanting beauty, and about half-way the traveller will stop for lunch at the village of Seefeld. If so, let him visit the church. There he will be shown a "host," or consecrated wafer, stained with blood, which the priest will take from its silver shrine and will exhibit to him with many genuflexions and much devotion. He will be assured that it is five hundred years old. It is said that six centuries ago an unbelieving Herzog *bit* the wafer incredulously. Immediately the host

bled, the Duke was struck down, and as he fell he clutched at the stone altar, on which we are shown the deep impression of his hand ! Such are the unshaken convictions of the people among whom we move in the Bavarian Alps.

Partenkirchen is a village placed in the midst of the rich valley of the Iser. Two Englishmen have made their home there, Lord Wilton, and Colonel Ward who has shown such unwearied good nature to so many English travellers. "Herr Oberst," as he is universally called, has for many years been the generous friend and adviser of the peasants of Oberammergau, and he

renders them effectual assistance amid the difficulties brought upon them by the rush of curious and careless visitors.

Next morning—on Saturday, May 17—we took on our Innsbruck carriage, with its good-humoured driver, to Oberammergau. It is a drive of about three hours. At first the road lies for some miles along the banks of the Iser, and it is broidered by marsh-marigolds, gentians, auriculas, forget-me-nots, and many other flowers, of which some are rare in England. At Oberau the traveller may leave his carriage, which will proceed by the new road while he walks to the top of the pass by the old

road, which is much shorter, but so steep as to be dangerous for vehicles. It passes through a mountain gorge, in which he will have the advantage of deep shade, while he hears the torrent roaring far below. By the roadside are several memorials of deaths by accident. The most tragic of these is an obelisk which records how on a summer Sunday in 1875 the Munich sculptor Braun and his assistant were conveying to Oberammergau the colossal marble figure of St. John for the monument of the Crucifixion erected by the late King of Bavaria, when the waggon was overturned by a stone, and the statue,

falling with a crash, killed the sculptor on the spot, and injured his assistant so seriously that he died in anguish at Ettal a few hours afterwards. At the top of the Ettaler Berg we awaited the carriage, and soon after we came up with a long train of forty-six carriages, omnibuses, and vehicles of all descriptions, which were conveying four hundred people from the neighbouring towns and villages to see the Passion Play. They were stopping to refresh themselves by the monastery of Ettal, and were a promiscuous body of persons of all ranks and all ages—well-dressed ladies and gentlemen, tradespeople,

and artisans. Here and everywhere it was impossible for an Englishman not to deplore the contrast presented by this crowd and the crowds which assemble at places of amusement on our Bank Holidays. The youths, most of whom had fine, open, honest faces, and wore flowers in their hats or at their buttonholes, were all polite and well behaved. Many of them were drinking beer with their lunch, but the beer was the thin, wholesome, and perfectly harmless lager beer, on which no one could easily get intoxicated.¹ There

¹ To charge it as a crime against the people of Oberammergau that they drink beer is absurd. If no more intoxicating drink than this lager beer were drunk in

was no noise, no rowdyism, no drunkenness, no coarse language, no bad behaviour, but much quiet and courteous happiness. Leaving them behind, we descended the pass and came in sight of the isolated Kofelspitze, which towers over the valley like a guardian spirit. The pious villagers have surmounted it with a cross, which was outlined against the sky in blazing sunlight. Soon afterwards we were driving

England instead of the heady, stupefying, adulterated poison consumed by our own peasantry, it would be well for us. It is a singular incidental sign of the religious spirit of the people that over the brewery which has occupied the monastery of Ettal since its secularisation in 1803, still runs the ancient pious chronogram, "May God bless the beer of Ettal."

by the singularly bright and pure waters of the Ammer, and in a few moments more we entered the village, with its clean, whitewashed houses. The scene is very peaceful. The hills to the right are not rocky and snow-clad eminences such as those we have left behind us, but are soft slopes, clothed to the summit with the exquisitely intermingled light green of the larches and dark green of the pines, and reminding us of the Buckinghamshire hills about Velvet Lawn or Aston Clinton.

Our destination was the house of Josef Mayr, who this year, for the third time, at the age of forty-two, plays the character of

Christus, in which he first commanded such deep respect and sympathy as a young man in 1870. The house is humble but exquisitely clean, and we occupy the best rooms in it, which Colonel Ward has procured for us—the same, I believe, which were occupied in 1880 by the Duke and Duchess of Connaught. At the door we were welcomed by Frau Mayr, and by two bright and frank-mannered daughters; and when Joseph Mayr came out to greet us we at once recognised the long dark hair and marked earnest features with which photographs have made Europe so familiar. I am told that in various papers

—“religious” papers especially, which are frequently the most unscrupulous in their malignity—there have of late been attacks on Josef Mayr quite unpardonable in their injustice. He has been charged with avarice, with ambitious self-seeking, with hypocrisy, with the abuse of sacred feelings for personal ends, and with other odious faults, and these attacks have preyed upon his mind so deeply as to injure his health. I am glad to give my emphatic testimony, based on all that I saw of him and all that I heard about him from those who had known him well for years, that these attacks are as shamefully

calumnious as those which malice loves to invent about any who awaken envy by unwilling publicity. I believe Josef Mayr to be an entirely devout, sincere, humble-minded man, who does not love that fame of the world which is always half dis-fame. He never pretends to be more than he is, a simple artisan among his brother peasants in his native village; and he is so far from enjoying the attentions of the outer world which rushes to his happy valley that he will vote for the final discontinuance of the Play if it becomes tainted with all the worldliness and vulgar curiosity which would degrade it to the

level of an ordinary European spectacle. The visitors to Oberammergau always wish to have an interview with Mayr. These intrusions are utterly distasteful to him, and if he does not repel them it is only because of his native courtesy and kindness. Visitors would be more considerate and well-bred if they let him alone. All sorts of persons are endeavouring to speculate in tickets and to make money out of the adventure. Mayr receives but £50 for his prominent, harassing, and fatiguing share in the representation, and he uses his best influence to save himself and his village from the degrading influences of

the world and the devil, to which at this time they will be so powerfully tempted to yield.

During the afternoon we wandered about the rich meadows of the valley, and up to the marble group of the Crucifixion. While we sat on the steps, under the fateful statue of St. John, a pilgrimage of some fifty peasants—men, women, and boys—who had walked more than twenty miles along the hot roads from neighbouring villages, came to the hilltop, and, kneeling devoutly before the colossal figure of Christ, joined in alternate voices in fervent repetitions of the Creed, the Pater Noster,

the Ave Maria and the Gloria in Excelsis. We afterwards met this same body of pilgrims in the Church, humbly engaged in the same religious exercises. Again it was impossible not to wonder whether many English labourers and peasant boys would have been found thus spontaneously —no priest or pastor with them—to spend part of a Saturday holiday in joining unashamed with women to kneel on the grass and pray in the sight of all spectators under the open sky.

The village is busy with crowds of people, but as the performance is to be the *Hauptprobe*, which is not advertised, there

are comparatively few foreigners present. There are not more than a hundred English and Americans, although there are nearly *six hundred* reporters from all countries! One sign of the approaching Play is seen in the long locks of numbers of men and boys; for four hundred or more of the small population take some part in the representation or in the tableaux, or at least appear *beim Volk* in the scenic crowds. A beautiful child, with long fair hair streaming over his shoulders from under his green Tyrolese hat ornamented with its plume of the black-cock, stops us and offers a programme for sale. We ask him what part he is to sus-

tain to-morrow, and with a shy blush he tells us that he is to be *ein Engel*. We buy his programme, and do not tell him that he at least will look his part.

We retire early to rest, but not at once to sleep, for bands and processions are moving about and vehicles are hourly rolling in. At four in the morning a cannon is fired, and by five o'clock the Church is crowded with multitudes of worshippers, who include a large part of the population. At six o'clock there is a full choral celebration of High Mass for all who are to take chief part in the Play, many of whom partake of the Lord's

Supper. It must never be forgotten that to them the Play is meant to be, and is, not a theatrical exhibition, but the deeply solemn fulfilment of a sacred pledge—*zur Erbauung und Betrachtung mit allerhöchster und allergnädigster Bewilligung aufgeführt*—by which for two and a half centuries they and their fathers have been bound.

For every one knows that in 1633 the whole surrounding country was devastated by the ravages of the plague, and that to protect the village it was surrounded by a cordon of watchers. One man, named Kaspar Schisler, had been

mowing at Eschenlohe, in which place, as in others, there had been a fearful mortality. Yearning to see his wife and children, he came over the mountains and evaded the watch. He brought the plague with him. Some say that he dropped dead on the threshold of his home. When eighty-four inhabitants of the little village had been swept away in a single month the heart-stricken survivors met together and vowed to God that if He would remove the scourge they would every ten years perform a Passion Play with the best skill and the deepest devotion in their power. Their vow was heard. From that moment

not one more victim succumbed, and the plague was stayed. For decade after decade the simple villagers have continued to perform the Play, except once or twice when war has rendered it impossible. There was nothing strange about their vow. Passion Plays were universal throughout the Middle Ages. They were directly encouraged by the priests, and were regarded as a means of educating the people. Unfortunately, however, they were very frequently mixed up with vulgar, profane, indecent, and horrifying incidents, and for this reason they fell into grave disrepute, and after the Reformation ceased to be

acted except in remote villages. To this day there are similar Plays at Brixlegg, Kohlgrub, Mittelwald, and other places in the neighbouring mountains; but the survival and fame of the Oberammergau Play is due to its intrinsic, exceptional, and progressive merit. The peasants have had the good sense and wisdom at each representation to strike out every dubious element. The devil, for instance, who played a large part in the old representations, has entirely disappeared. The temptation of Judas is revealed to us as part of his life, and does not need to be interpreted by any visible appearance of

the Spirit of Evil. But how horribly crude were some of the original elements of the Mystery is shown in an old copy still in the possession of Burgmeister Lang. In this copy we see from the stage direction that when Judas has hanged himself a swarm of small devils rush forward and tear out and devour his entrails. Such horrors have long vanished. In the Play as acted this year there is not a single feature at which the most refined spectator need take the least offence. Two good and able men helped to bring about this immense improvement. One was Dr. Othmar Weiss, one of the

monks of Ettal, and afterwards pastor at Jesewang; the other was Pastor Daisenberger, who for thirty years was the devoted friend and beloved teacher of his villagers, and who only died in 1882. He was the Oberlin, or the Felix Neff, of Oberammergau, and the progressive improvements of the Play since (after 1830) it ceased to be acted in the old churchyard are in large measure due to his fostering care. Thus this year for the first time there is no attempt visibly to represent the Bloody Sweat in the Agony at Gethsemane, and the scenes after the Resurrection are advantageously curtailed.

Punctually at eight o'clock we were seated in the best places of the theatre, exactly opposite to the stage, on the front row of those seats which are covered over so as to protect the spectator from the glare of sunshine and from the rain or snow which has frequently fallen during the earlier representations in former years. This year the stage and scenery are greatly improved, and are the work of Karl Lautenschläger, of Munich. The streets of Jerusalem are simply but effectively represented. On the right of the central building (facing the spectator) is the house of Annas, on the left the house of Pilate.

The scenes which here take place are no longer spoilt by crowding the personages into two narrow balconies. The curtain in front of the proscenium represents Isaiah, Moses, and Jeremiah ; the upper part of it is made to rise, the lower (as in the ancient theatres of Greece and Rome) to fall. On the pediment above is a picture of Christ blessing children. The drop-curtain, which is drawn aside to show the tableaux, is painted with Byzantine-looking angels. But an indescribable beauty is given to the representation by the fact that the main part of the stage is in the open air, and over it we see the soft green slopes of



the pine-clad hills, while birds sing, and the pure sunshine bathes the whole scene, and, careless of the deepest of human tragedies which is being visibly set before us, the life of nature is going on, and the swallows are twittering and disporting themselves in the blue sky over our heads.

Although this is only the final rehearsal, the theatre is filled with four thousand spectators, of whom the greater part are peasants from the surrounding country. All are orderly and expectant. As the clocks strike eight a cannon is fired, the hum of the multitude is hushed, and with-

out a moment's delay the *Schutzgeister*—or protecting spirits, who form the chorus—file in from the side passages on the right and left. They are twenty-four in number—namely, fourteen maidens as angels and ten men as genii, and they form a large semicircle in front of the stage. They are clad, both men and women, in ample tunics of soft white material, over which they wear mantles richly embroidered with gold and arranged in different but graceful folds by each wearer. These mantles are of green, violet, dark blue, light blue, orange, brown, red, and crimson ; while that of the tall and stately choragus is of glowing scarlet. All

the choir wear golden crowns, and they not only form a beautiful chord of colour, but play their parts with a wonderful grace and dignity, which is partly natural but partly the result of training and tradition. Their function is exactly that of the old Greek chorus in the Athenian trilogies. They act the part of idealised spectators, to explain the force of the tableaux and to point the moral and meaning of the entire Play. The choragus, whose voice is beautifully clear, recites in a few words the object of the representation, dwelling earnestly on its sacred character. Then, in clear, sweet, powerful voices, the chorus, accompanied

by the small and simple orchestra, begin the first song, which tells of a man's fall and God's plan of redemption. At one point in their song they fall back in orderly symmetry along lines marked upon the stage; and, grouped on either side, they point to the tableaux revealed to us by the drawing of the curtain.

The chief music of the Passion Play was written by a former schoolmaster and organist of the village, named Rochus Dedler, who died, while still young, in 1822. It is of the simplest character. It contains none of those infinitely pathetic movements and crashing outbursts with

which the genius of Handel has made the world familiar, nor has it the marvellously inwoven harmonies of the Passion Music of Sebastian Bach. Yet it is throughout admirably suited to its purpose. Sweet, solemn, and regular, it is not beyond the adequate rendering of a peasant choir, and is often sufficiently moving to bring into the eyes of the listener the gracious dew of tears. Two passages of the music may be signalised as specially full of beauty. One is in the song preceding the condemnation of Christ by the Sanhedrim, where the chorus bursts into a fervent appeal to God for vengeance :—

Gott vertilge dieser Frevler Rotte
Die sich wider Dich empört,

and then a thrilling child's voice is heard
replying in nobler accents—

Aber nein ! Er kam nicht zum Verderben
Von der Vater's Herrlichkeit :
Alle Sünder sollen durch Ihn erben
Gnade, Huld, und Seligkeit.

The other is where the cry of the deluded
multitude—

Barabbas sei
Von Banden frei !

is answered passionately by the chorus—

Nein ! Jesu sei
Von Banden frei—

until they too are compelled to ratify the

imprecation, " His blood be on us and on our children ! " It is no slight proof of the educating power of this Passion Play that, whereas it is one of its conditions that none but natives of the village should take part in it, the small population is not only able to furnish twelve or fourteen admirable actors, and five or six hundred persons, old and young, male and female, who can effectively take their part in the scenes and tableaux and general management, but also twenty-four singers with pleasant voices, each of whom takes a solo part in turn. Of course the singing is far from perfect, but it may be said without paradox that it

is better than if it were, for it has nothing artificial in its character. The singers, if their accuracy is not faultless, may at least be listened to with pleasure, and they accompany every one of their songs with varied and rhythmic gesticulations—a sort of poetry of motion—which adds greatly both to the beauty of the spectacle and the effectiveness of the recitative. Each singer is left to use such actions as seem most suitable. One or two of them are more or less conventional in their movements, but there were some who seemed to be inspired by the words they were singing to accompany them with the most fitting gestures,

and one man in particular showed a perfect genius in thus seconding and interpreting the language which he recited.

The tableaux—evidently selected by a master mind—are meant to show that *Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet ; Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet*. They are designed to impress upon the spectator the truths that the drama of man's redemption was no isolated fact in the story of mankind, but that it had been foreshadowed by prophetic analogies from the earliest ages. Let it be granted that some of the analogies could hardly be accepted as such by modern criticism ; yet it must be remem-

bered that the Play was written in an epoch of Biblical interpretation which was indeed præ-scientific in many of its assumptions, but which was actuated by the profound conviction that the minutest incidents in Jewish history were intentional prefigurations of events in the life of Christ. And (to take but two instances) if we can no longer say that there was any intentional "type" or prophecy of the traitor-kiss of Judas in the treacherous salute of Amasa by Joab, or of the rejection of the Synagogue in the divorce of Vashti, we may yet see in those Old Testament narratives a certain human analogy which may be

harmlessly used for illustration and edification.

Of these illustrative tableaux, representing scenes of the Old Testament, there are no less than twenty-four. They call into requisition the services of a multitude of the villagers, so that there are sometimes three or four hundred persons on the stage. They represent such scenes as the selling of Joseph by his brethren; the promotion of Joseph to be ruler in Egypt; the sacrifice of Abraham; the repudiation of Vashti by King Ahasuerus, and the choice of Esther, who is made a type of the chosen Church of Christ; the

Bride of the Canticles bewailing the absence of her beloved ; the smiting of Micaiah on the cheek by the false prophet Zedekiah, son of Chenaanah ; the condemnation of innocent Naboth ; the misery of Job ; the last triumph of Samson ; the scapegoat ; and one scene from the Apocrypha, the setting forth from home of the young Tobias on his perilous journey with Raphael, "the affable Archangel." There is not one of the scenes which is not effectively set forth, and it is wonderful to observe how absolutely motionless are all the assembled figures — even the youngest children — during the

moment or two that each tableau remains visible. Whatever mind and taste may have presided over these scenes, the grouping of the actors and the harmonious blending of the colours is a triumph of artless art. Doubtless on the great stage of Drury Lane and other theatres an experienced stage manager with boundless resources of wealth at his command could present something infinitely more costly and gorgeous; but the beauty of these groups depends mainly on the fact that they are *not* "theatrical," and have not lost the spontaneity and simplicity which make them so suitable for their

function in carrying out the special sacred conception. Never certainly on the most splendid of European stages—never in London, or Paris, or Dresden, or Rome—have I seen tableaux which could be compared for native beauty and effectiveness with these, which are seen in the light of day, and in which none of the stage tricks which heighten the semblance of beauty are for a moment permitted. Some of them are quite exquisite in their loveliness. Such are the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise by the Cherub with the flaming sword, while the gleaming folds of the Serpent are wound round the Tree of

the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Such, again, are the crowded and wonderful scenes of the manna gatherers and the uplifting of the brazen serpent. Most beautiful of all, and really touching in their pathos, are the two which represent the murder of Abel, and Adam and Eve surrounded by their innocent little ones, while the father of our race earns his bread by the sweat of his brow.

So long and careful has been the training for the Play that from first to last there is not a single hitch. The prologue and the song of the chorus in each instance explains the coming scene, and gives

ample time for its preparation, so that all is ready when the curtain is withdrawn, and there is not one tedious delay. And this becomes all the more astonishing when the visitor goes over the dressing-rooms, as I did. They are nothing more than deal partitions, without a single article of luxury in them, and not even the most ordinary furniture. Yet they suffice for the costumes of the actors, the chorus, and the multitudes of supernumeraries of both sexes and of every age.

We now come to the central incidents of the Play itself. While the spectators are filing into their seats, all who are to take

part in the representation, many of whom have been already solemnised by the Holy Communion, are on their knees praying behind the scenes. At the close of the prologue, the opening song, and the tableaux of the expulsion from Paradise and of a cross surrounded by angelic and human worshippers, young voices are heard singing, "Eternal One, listen to the stammering of Thy children who worship Thee. Let us now follow the Redeemer upon the thorny path until He has fought the burning fight and shed His blood for us."¹ Then the shouts of the multi-

¹ As an illustration of the keynotes of pathos and peni-

tude are heard behind the scenes singing "Hail to Thee, hail to Thee, Son of David!" and as the chorus retire by the side entrances the whole stage is filled by a moving crowd. They represent the Galilean pilgrims and inhabitants of Jerusalem, in correct Oriental costumes, who, with Hosannas, and outspread garments, and waving palms, are heralding the approach of the Divine Prophet of

tence which are thus struck, it may be worth while to record the old Ammergau proverb: "*The way to the Passions-spiel should be a way of penance.*" In accordance with this view, no seats were placed on the steep ascent of the old road. One of the wayside memorials records that, in July 1866, Alois Pfansler died at that spot from apoplexy caused by his exertions in climbing the hill.

Nazareth. There is a deep hush as the figure of the Christ enters riding on an ass. Every eye is turned towards him, and the spring sunlight streams full over the scene. If it is less characterised by passion and movement than we should have expected, this perhaps better attunes the minds of the spectators to the sacredness and solemnity of what they are about to witness. The Christus is dressed in a light grey tunic, over which, across the breast and shoulders, is a red mantle. He enters in quiet dignity, and alights from the ass, on which he has been sitting sideways, and which is quietly led aside ;

then, amid the prayers, praises, and blessings of the multitude, he proceeds with quiet dignity to purge the Temple of the chaffering throng of traders, overthrowing the tables of the money-changers, letting loose the doves from their cages, and silencing by the calm grandeur of his authority the murmurs and menaces of the merchants and their abettors. With one or two strokes of the cords with which they have tied up their cattle he drives them from the sacred precincts. In the old days of the Mysteries there was a certain tumultuous and almost comic element in this scene, for the mediæval

sightseer expected to be provided with the ludicrous in connection with the pathetic. Now it is all done with consummate reverence, and there is nothing at which the most frivolous spectator could venture even to smile.

And at this first scene arises the whole momentous question, Is it or is it not permissible, is it or is it not in accordance with the awfulness of Christian devotion, that such scenes should be represented at all, and that a peasant or any man should appear before thousands of spectators in the awful guise of the Lord of Life? I have met persons deeply religious who de-

nounced the Oberammergau Play as a shocking profanity. So it might seem to be if it were attempted anew in these days ; but of those who see it in its own village no one will carry away so wrong an impression. There we enjoy it amid its true surroundings. We see that it had its ultimate root in the deep, unquestioning devotion of the Middle Ages, and that the peasants still regard it as a work only less sacred than the High Mass at which they have all been present in the church in the morning before they begin their work. They have acted from the first not only with the permission but under the immediate sanction and

supervision of priests whom they venerated and loved, and who in former days used themselves to represent the principal characters. No misgiving about the holiness of their procedure has ever crossed the minds of the people in Oberammergau and other Bavarian villages where analogous "mysteries" are still occasionally performed. On the contrary, it is their wish, and the wish of their religious teachers, always to choose the youths of the loftiest and most blameless character to play the parts of the most sacred personages. The consciousness that they are set apart to do so, and

that such selection is a reward of high character, acts upon the dispositions of these young men and women like a controlling spell. They feel themselves consecrated for a sacred function. This year Josef Mayr enacts the Christus for the third time, and we can see at a glance that the responsibility has weighed most deeply upon his life and conduct, and has had something of an inspiring force. Proposals have sometimes been made by worldly speculators to take the whole Passions-Spiel to great cities. The conscience of Christendom might well cry out in alarm against the hideous pro-

fanation of transplanting such a spectacle from its true surroundings in the hearts of a simple, believing peasantry to pollute it into wicked and blasphemous vulgarity by setting it upon the boards of some coarse rendezvous of idlers, or worse, in Paris or in London. The Oberammergauers might make thousands of pounds by accepting such offers. To their honour, they have always resisted them, even as it is now their one endeavour to resist the deteriorating influences to which, against their own will, they are being so sorely subjected. "If they want to remove our play," said Josef Mayr, "they must remove

with it the Kofelspitze and its guarding cross." It is a curious accident that this year that cross was blown down, and has just been renewed. Some of the villagers see in this accident an omen that the Play ought no longer to be continued; and, indeed, it is said that some of them believe that they have had a heavenly intimation that henceforth they are quit of their olden vow, and that with this year the public decennial repetition of the Play should cease for ever. It may be well for them—well for their happiness and for their faith—if they come to this decision. If that lovely range of meadows

under the snowy hills, watered by their crystal stream, is to become like some idle watering-place—crowded by fashionable visitors, invaded by smart villas, polluted with foul, lying advertisements, and crowded with monster hotels—they will have purchased their popularity at the terrible cost of all which gives to human life its highest dignity and its purest sweetness.

The eminent Eduard Devrient—a high-minded man, and one of the finest actors of his generation—wrote in 1851 that “too much could not be said about this highly remarkable drama of the people, to spread

a thorough knowledge and just appreciation of its beauty and sublimity." It has since then made a deep impression on the minds of many great thinkers, among whom we may mention the late Deans of Westminster and St. Paul's. What was said and written of it by Dean Milman, Dean Stanley, and Sir George Grove, in 1860, gave the main impulse in England to its enormous popularity. Up to the year 1860 it was visited by very few foreigners.¹

¹ Among those who helped to give celebrity to the Play must be mentioned the Baroness Tautphœus, who described it in the novel "Quits" in 1863, in chap. xviii., called "A Remnant of the Middle Ages." The description is too long to quote, but readers will be glad to see the following passage :—

Two considerations may help to put the spectator at the right point of view, and save him from sweeping and unjust prejudices. One is that the Play has evidently entered into the inmost religious life of the

“It would be difficult to describe Nora’s feelings as the representative of Jesus appeared on the scene, but so completely did the person and manner of the artist-performer satisfy her high-wrought expectations, that dissatisfaction or disappointment was certainly not among them. She perceived instantly that what was thus before her would take the place of all the pictures and statues she had ever seen, and remain indelibly impressed on her mind for ever. It was therefore this one deeply interesting figure that . . . she followed with breathless interest and anxiety throughout ; and never did the eminence of the character of Christ strike her so forcibly, or the worthlessness of mankind, and the ignoble motives which are the springs of their actions, become so glaringly apparent as on this occasion. . . . A sceptic might perhaps have followed the representation with criticising

people ; so that, as Eduard Devrient said, in the dignity, simplicity, and sincerity of their bearing, "Man Sieht, die Darstellung ist nicht angelernt, sie ist angelebt." The other is that they have never had any other

curiosity, a less imaginative mind with calm self-possession. Nora forgot herself, time, place, spectators, everything, and saw, heard, and felt with a vividness that at length completely overwhelmed her. All that habit enables us to read and hear read almost unmoved, and as a matter of history, was brought before Nora with a force so perfectly irresistible, that, various and eloquent as had often been the sermons she had heard, excellent and celebrated as were the pictures she had seen, never had she been moved as on the present occasion."

An impression no less deep was produced on the mind of Lady Herber of Lea. "In deep silence," she says, "we left the representation and wended our way to the church, where we could best reflect on what we had seen, and pray that these impressions might never disappear from our mind and heart."

object than that of vividly setting forth the narratives of the Evangelists. The scenes of the Gospels have for centuries been represented by painting and sculpture; the words of the Gospel have been read for centuries in the hearing of the people. It never even occurred to the children of the "ages of faith" that they were acting otherwise than piously when they reproduced in living groups the great pictures of the mediæval painters, and emphasised the truth that the words of the Gospels were once spoken under the light of the earthly sun by human lips to human ears. If the devotional feelings may be stimu-

lated by the genius of the artist when we stand before a picture of Raphael or a statue of Donatello, must they be shocked by seeing the same scenes and persons reverently presented as part of an act of worship? St. Francis of Assisi, sweetest and simplest of men, stimulated by the story of the Nativity, was the first who ever prepared at Christmas time a *presepio* — one of those representations of the stable and manger of the Nativity which may be seen in the Church of the Ara Cœli at Rome, and in so many Italian cities. He believed that a miracle had sanctioned his effort, and that a living *Bambino* replaced

the little image. Vivid presentation has always been an instrument of religious teaching among Southern peoples, and many scenes of the Passion Play are reproductions of pictures—such, for instance, as Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper," Raphael's "Lo Spasimo," Correggio's "Ecce Homo," and Rubens's "Deposition from the Cross." In the play as now presented scarcely one word is put into the mouth of Christ which is not taken immediately from His recorded utterances.

The first redactors of the Play had read the Gospels with close attention and keen insight. They had, for instance, fathomed

to the depths the worst phases of that worldly sacerdotalism which the condemnation of Christ reveals in such lurid characters. The Jewish priests and Pharisees are rightly exhibited to us as so hypocritical as not even to suspect their own hypocrisy. The profession of the loftiest motives is constantly on their lips. All they do is done, they assert, for the honour of God and of their country, and of Moses, their great lawgiver. They make their constant appeal to the consciences of those whom they inveigle and seduce. They look upon themselves as the vindicators of true religion, and, taking the too common

priestly view, that wrong becomes right in the cause of orthodoxy, it is always in the name of Heaven that they do the deeds of hell.

Nor is less psychological insight shown in the close and original conception of the character of Judas. His final fall is in the play connected immediately with the disappointment of his greed when Mary of Bethany "wasted" the precious ointment in anointing the feet of Christ. Judas is not represented as the coarse ruffian of the mediæval Mysteries. He is thoroughly human; the words which he applies to Christ, "He was such a good man," are

unspeakably pathetic, and are evidently wrung from his heart. They correspond to so genuine a conviction as almost to shake him in his fell purpose. We pity him all along, for he is not represented as wholly and irredeemably bad, but only as a man who has no faith and no enthusiasm, and who, being disappointed in his lofty expectations of earthly advantage, and even alarmed lest he should be reduced to beggary, has allowed his besetting sin of greed to lay such hold upon him as to render him an easy victim to the astute tamperings and religious exhortations of the priests and traders. We not only shudder over him ;

we weep for him, and we see in his ruin how pitiable and irreversible may be the perversion of a soul which was by no means destitute of worthy elements. Nay, we are even made to feel that Christ would have forgiven him as He forgave Peter but for his ultimate despair. When we consider the light of revolting and unmitigated odiousness in which the Middle Ages usually portrayed him "who also became a traitor"—

That furtive mien, that scowling eye,
Of hair that red and tufted fell,
It is—oh, where shall Brandan fly?—
The traitor Judas out of hell—

then we shall see that this Play was drawn up by no slavish or ordinary mind. The writer could see some gleam of hope even in the degradation of Judas. Apart from the acting altogether, the mere words of the Play are deeply worthy of study.

From the characters and structure of the Play we turn to the actors. It is no small testimony to the goodness and gifts of Josef Mayr that in his personation of the Christus he does not offend us by a single word or a single gesture. If there were in his bearing so much as the faintest touch of affectation or of self-consciousness, if there were the slightest lack of concentra-

tion in his look or the remotest suspicion of a strut in his gait, we should be compelled to turn aside with disgust. As it is, we forget the artisan altogether. We see a series of pictures set forth with such humble sincerity of heart that we are enabled to realise how, even in the midst of anguish and derision inflicted by the most brutal and ruthless of his tormentors, the Divine Prophet retained His attributes of awe and dominated over surging crowds and priests and potentates by the irresistible might of innocence even in the deepest weakness. It is easy to see that Josef Mayr utterly forgets himself, and

desires only to present a picture of what the Gospels tell us. His impersonation—it is something much higher and more sacred than acting—is the transference into a living picture of what the Gospels tell us about One who, alike in the tenderness of love amid His followers and the majesty of patient and silent suffering, and even in the anguish of humiliation and death, spake as never man spake, and presented to the world the overwhelming spectacle of sinless innocence, crushed by hatred which wore the mask of orthodox religion.

Peter Rendl, who takes the *rôle* of St.

John, and Franz Rutz, who takes that of Annas, and Michael Bauer, who appears as Simon of Cyrene, may be mentioned as excellent ; but some of the other actors deserve special notice. The character of St. Peter is taken now, for the fourth decade, by Jak Hett, who played it as far back as 1860. The Apostle is not specially prominent. It is part of the Scriptural simplicity, and therefore of the unintentional "Protestantism," of the Play, that no sort of supremacy is assigned to the "Man of Rock." He is scarcely even *primus inter pares*. But the scene of Peter's fall and repentance is admirably

rendered. Hett, like all the other actors, preserves the golden rule of *ne quid nimis*. It is no small testimony to them to say that not one of them succumbs to the facile temptation of overacting his part. This excellence would be unattainable if they were not trained to suppress and forget themselves. It is more than doubtful whether the most trained and consummate actors in Europe would acquit themselves as well as these poor wood-carvers. Actors would act ; but these men are not acting—they are expressing the deepest truths they know.

The part of Caiaphas is also taken for

the fourth time by J. E. Lang. No mediæval Pope could pronounce his speeches with more dignity and *verve*. He is what has been called "that terrible creature, a perfect priest," a man who in the cause of his personal interests, which he confounds with those of his order and of religion, will domineer and intrigue, and commit crimes which he gilds with the name of holy expediency. Such a man will "seem to be religious" even while he tempts the human instruments of his will to their own ruin, and ruthlessly flings them aside the moment that they have served his purpose. Caiaphas

is subtly discriminated from Annas, whose senility is a pale reflexion of similar elements of disposition; and also from the leading priest, Nathaniel, who is a coarser and more violently unscrupulous reproduction of the same evil tendencies. The impersonation of this bad, domineering priest by Sebastian Lang—a man of singularly fine presence—is one of the most powerful pieces of mere acting in the Play. And here there is room for acting, since Nathaniel is a purely imaginary personage. We see in him a picture of the most repulsive features of priestcraft. He is the evil genius, the *âme damnée* of the priestly

faction, and it falls to his lot to rouse the hatred and suspicion of the mob against Christ, as it might have fallen to an Arnold of Citeaux to goad the soldiers of De Montfort to the unholy crusade against Raymond of Toulouse. Some have complained that the scenes in the Sanhedrin are too long. To me they seemed particularly interesting; and they rose to thrilling effectiveness in the protests of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathæa against the iniquity and injustice of their own order.

The voluptuous and frivolous Herod, who is quite correctly represented as

a *blasé*, worldly cynic, is acted by Johann Diemer, and we may well be astonished that working-men who go back straight from the Play to their humble peasant homes and menial duties can enact kings and hierarchs with such astonishing propriety and force. The very highest praise must be given to the Pontius Pilate of Thomas Rendl. His fine acting of the part assigned to him—the Roman straightforwardness and inbred sense of justice which make him at first more than a match for the astute sophistries and subterranean machinations of the priestly conspirators—is perfectly

rendered. The scenes in which he takes part bring out very vividly the intense reluctance of the Procurator to yield to the wicked motives which were transparent to his judicial insight. In favour of the acquittal of the Divine sufferer were enlisted alike his clear convictions and his superstitious fears. Magnificent is the scorn with which he tells the priests that he wholly disbelieves in them and the sincerity of their motives, and that from them he expects neither justice, nor mercy, nor truth. Noble is the reluctant emotion with which he sentences Christ to be scourged, solely in

the hope that the spectacle of His silent anguish and unearthly majesty may at least move the mob to compassion, even if it cannot touch the stony hearts of the priests. Only after a long struggle and in consequence of the terror brought to bear on a guilty conscience is he at last constrained to give way ; and it is with a burst of indignation that, after having been forced to pronounce sentence, he breaks his staff of office and flings down its broken fragments. All these scenes of the Trial of Christ constitute a vivid comment, and a comment of no ordinary character, on the narratives of the Four Evangelists.

Gregor Lechner was the very remarkable Judas of 1871 and 1880. This year, owing to his age, he has had assigned to him the insignificant part of Simon of Bethany. But, though he only appears once for a few moments, even this slight *rôle* becomes important and interesting in his hands. The part of Judas is acted for the first time by Johann Zwink, who in 1871 and 1880 took the character of St. John. He acts with great power. His aloofness from the devoted spirit of the other Apostles is illustrated from the first. He takes no share in their loving demonstrations, his sullenness is turned

almost into savagery by Mary's act of "waste," and in the thwarting of all his earthly expectations by the sad prophecies of his Lord he succeeds in sophisticating his own conscience. Awfully as he shudders at the word "traitor," he persuades himself into the belief that no one can apply the word to him. But "the tempting opportunity meets the susceptible disposition," and he becomes the prey of the cunning traders and their priestly instigators. At the Last Supper Judas sits a little back from the others, and watches the scene with terror and suspicion. He visibly shrinks and trembles at the words

of Christ, "One of you shall betray Me." In the scene before the Sanhedrim he cowers and wavers before the appeal of Nicodemus, yet he cannot resist the fascination of the thirty pieces of silver which are counted out to him with a chink, and at which he clutches with a miser's grasp. Finally, the anguish of his awakenment when the priests taunt their now useless victim is very terrible. He hurls the thirty pieces of silver at their feet, and rushes out to pour forth his mad despair in one heartrending soliloquy, and finally to hang himself. This is a presentation which no one can witness unmoved, but

here, as throughout, good taste and the rules of true art have triumphed. We see the ragged, wind-swept tree of the field of blood, and we see Judas tear off his girdle, but before the actual suicide the curtain falls.

Many of the scenes of the play have an almost harrowing interest, but some of them may be singled out as specially effective. Among these are the conspiracy of the priests in the Sanhedrin, a most powerful conception from first to last; the parting of Jesus with His mother, Mary; the Last Supper; the courage and independence displayed by

Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathæa ; the mockery of Christ by the soldiers ; the silence before the contemptible Herod ; the scene before Pilate's judgment seat ; and the bearing of the Cross to Golgotha. The Last Supper is less true to fact than it might have been made, because it is an obvious reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's "Cenacolo." Further than this, it is almost the only scene in which the Gospel narrative is not strictly followed. The Christus puts a morsel of the bread into the mouth of each of the Apostles, whereas the λάβετε, φάγετε, of Matt. xxvi. 26, together with the ἔδωκεν of Mark xiv. 22 and the lan-

guage of Luke xxii. 17, 19, seem to show that the Apostles handed the bread and the cup to one another.

During some of these scenes there was scarcely a face among the four thousand spectators which was not wet with tears, and, what is more remarkable, some of the actors themselves were visibly weeping. There was of course no attempt at applause, for the audience were mostly peasants, who know how utterly unsuitable, and how entirely distasteful to the actors, would be such manifestations. But when the curtain falls on some of the more pathetic scenes there is among the people

a deep and audible sigh of relief, as though a stone had suddenly been rolled away from their hearts. To this there was but one exception. It was after the weird and harrowing soliloquy which ends in the suicide of Judas. Strange to record, when the curtain fell there was a sort of low audible laugh on all sides. It might have been supposed that this marked some failure in the actor, or at the best that it was a sort of mediæval reminiscence of the days when Judas was made purposely grotesque and in some respects comic. I interpret it differently. Shakspeare introduces the coarse porter in the middle of the most

ghastly scene of "Macbeth" to relieve the painful tension of feeling ; and I think that the ripple of laughter which ran through the audience really spoke to the depth of emotions which, after a silence so deep that you might have heard a pin drop, required some unwonted vent from their unusual strain.

¹ In the representation of Judas this year the grotesqueness which still remained in 1860 was still further eliminated. Hence (as I supposed) the laugh of the spectators after the curtain falls upon his suicide must be traditional. Dean Stanley says : "When at the last he clammers up the fatal tree, tearing off the branches as he reaches the top, and the curtain falls to veil his end, it is probably as much from the admixture of the grotesque as from the sense that the villain has got his due, that the commoner part of the audience is roused for once to an incongruous expression of derision." His

What are we to say of the last scenes of all? Speaking of my own personal impressions, I can only say that they seemed to me too awfully sacred to be witnessed without misgiving. Everything, indeed, is done to prepare the minds of the spectators. The chorus, laying aside their splendid mantles, appear in black; the song which they sing and the words spoken by the choragus are meant to

suicide has been progressively softened. First, devils carried him off; then, swine devoured his entrails; next (in 1860), his death-shriek was omitted; now (1890), he no longer climbs the tree.

I may remind the reader that the very word *diablerie*, like the Italian *diavoleria*, owes its origin to the comic introduction of evil spirits in the old Miracle Plays.

hush every heart into the most profound solemnity. But here the thing represented was too overpowering, and the imagination was alarmed. This, however, must be said. In spite of the marvellous realism there is the most unbroken reverence. The great minds which worked out the ideal of the play rose superior to a morbid extravagance. Even amid the brief agony of the Crucifixion they never lose sight of the predominant elements of hope and joy. The scenes of the Resurrection and Ascension—of which the last is only a lovely picture reproduced—have been most wisely curtailed, and I would suggest

to the Oberammergauers that they would be wise also to omit the Angel with the cup, and especially the words which he speaks in the Garden of Gethsemane.

But when we proceed to ask, "What is the total effect of the Play?" I do not think that any unbiassed judgment will question that it has been up to this time predominantly good. It has been to these poor but now prosperous peasants the very poetry of their lives, of which it has formed a most important part. It has deepened their religious character, stimulated their devotion, increased their knowledge, and marvellously developed all their artistic and

intellectual gifts. It has done this without in the least spoiling the simplicity of their characters or making them discontented with

Their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure.

The Play lasts from eight o'clock to twelve, and then (just as was probably the case in the old Greek trilogies) there is a pause for rest and refreshment. During this pause we went back to Josef Mayr's house for lunch, and there the bright maiden who waited on us and did the work of a servant had just been conspicuous on the stage as one of the *Schutzgeister*. She had ap-

peared with her long fair hair streaming over her shoulders, singing solos of sacred words in a sweet and powerful voice before that vast audience, and arrayed in a crown of gold and a splendid mantle of gold-embroidered blue. Her prominence did not make her less of a lady or less of an active servant. A young man, with his long dark locks, who had been another member of the chorus, was moving about in his shirt-sleeves and waiting on his guests. For four months these poor people are the observed of all observers; a fierce light of publicity beats upon them; they are swept into the rushing and restless current of

European life ; they are criticised in every newspaper and every capital in all the languages of civilisation ; their names will be household words, and their photographs will be sold by thousands. To-morrow they sink back with perfect contentment to their unknown, uneventful peasant life, as hewers of wood and drawers of water. No doubt this year they will make large sums of money, and money has a singularly corrupting power ; but the money has to be divided among large numbers, and it has hitherto been spent with self-denying generosity on the improvement of the theatre and its properties. The expenses

are great. The dresses alone cost about 14,000 marks, for, as there is no artificial light or stage delusion, everything has to be of the best, and the dresses are all spoilt when the rain falls on the unprotected actors. Every effort will doubtless be made to secure the repetition of the Play in the year 1900, for many interests are involved. The hotel proprietors at Munich told me that there they never had seasons comparable to the years in which the Passionsschauspiel was acted; and I expressed my wonder that a great capital, rich with all the resources of wealth and art, should be so largely de-

pendent on the peasants of a little village of two hundred houses in the Bavarian Alps. But the gravest, the wisest, the most serious of the Oberammergau villagers feel anxious misgivings about the future. They do not love to see their village invaded by crowds of sight-seers, of whom it is inevitable that some should be insultingly curious and superciliously critical. They fear that their characters and the character of their homes will be injured by the influx of alien elements; and they feel that loss of religious purity would be ill compensated by any amount of increased wealth. Not a few of them

are half resolved that this decade shall witness the last Passion Play. They have an instinctive sense that the world has outgrown the need for their efforts, and would end in making them unreal, vulgar, and profane. This humble flower from the Middle Ages has lived on, as it were, in the crevice of its native rock; but it is doubtful whether it can long keep its bloom and fragrance in the altered atmosphere and crowded soil.

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.



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